

THE CEDAR OF LEBANON*

BY MARY PERLE ANDERSON

Religion, poetry, and history have all united to make famous the cedars of Mount Lebanon. Again and again they have been visited by the pilgrim, by the distinguished traveller, by the man of science. Grave doubts exist, however, as to whether the tree now known as the cedar of Lebanon, *Cedrus Libani* Barr, is the one so frequently mentioned in the Old Testament, for these cedars occupy a lofty and isolated position. They are twenty miles from the coast, in a rocky mountain valley at a height of six thousand feet on the side of Mount Lebanon, and about four thousand feet from its summit. Therefore they could have been transported to Jerusalem only with the greatest difficulty and expense. The wood, too, is inferior in color and durability to the wood of the more common cypress and juniper, and it is probable that one or the other of these more easily accessible trees was used for building purposes in the days of Solomon.

The botanical history of the cedar of Lebanon is less varied than that of many humbler plants. Tournefort called it a larch ; Linnaeus, a pine ; Poiret, a spruce. Dodonaeus named it *Cedrus magna*, and in 1714, Barrelier gave the tree its present name of *Cedrus Libani*.

During the sixteenth century it became so much of a custom to make a pilgrimage to the cedars of Mount Lebanon that it was necessary to take steps for the preservation of the trees, for the pious pilgrims carried away much wood for the construction of crosses and tabernacles. In this the Maronites were more successful than we of the present day in our efforts to preserve our forests and native wild flowers. They issued an edict threatening excommunication to all who should injure the trees. Not even a branch was allowed to be cut except once a year, when, on the eve of the Transfiguration, a festival known as the Feast of the Cedars was held, and an altar was built under one of the largest and oldest of the trees.

From the middle of the sixteenth century, we have the records

* Illustrated with the aid of the McManes fund.

of many famous travellers and scientists who visited the cedars. In 1550, Belon reports the number as twenty-eight, and says, "No other tree grows in the valley in which they are situated ;



The Cedar of Lebanon in the Jardin des Plantes, Paris.

and it is generally so covered with snow as to be only accessible in summer." In 1574, Raiewolf gives the number as twenty-six, but adds, "There are two others the branches whereof are quite

damaged for age. I also went about in this place to look for some young ones but could find none at all." In 1655, Thévenot said that there were twenty-three trees, and a half century later a reliable witness writes of the cedars, "Here are some very old and of prodigious bulk, and others younger and of a smaller size. Of the former, I could reckon up only sixteen, the latter are very numerous."

In 1722, La Roque tells us that the largest of the trees had a trunk nineteen feet in circumference and a head one hundred and twenty feet in circumference. In 1744, Poccoke says there are "fifteen large ones and a great number of young cedars." In 1829, Pariset writes, "There are not above a dozen large trees, but there may be 400-500 small ones," and in 1832, there is a note of pathos in Lamartine's simple statement, "There are now but seven large trees."

In the autumn of 1860, J. D. Hooker visited the famous trees and in the November number of the *Natural History Review* of the year 1862, gives a fuller account of them than his predecessors. In this article, we read that on the side of the mountain, the cedars "appear as a black speck in the great area of corry and its moraines, which contain no other arboreous vegetation, nor any shrubs, but a few small berberry and rose bushes, that form no feature in the landscape. The number of the trees is about four hundred; they form a single group about four hundred yards in diameter with one or two outstanding trees not far from the rest. They are disposed in nine groups corresponding to as many hummocks of the moraine on which they occur." With regard to number, Hooker says that there were only fifteen trees above fifteen feet in girth and only two others above twelve feet. As to size, they varied from eighteen inches to forty feet in girth. He himself says that it is a significant fact that there was no tree of less than eighteen inches girth, not even seedlings of a second year's growth.

The above records seem to indicate that conditions favorable for the germination and growth of new trees come only at long intervals in this isolated valley on the side of Mount Lebanon. What the conditions are that govern the increase of population

among these aristocratic and exclusive trees, and keep the number limited to the "four hundred" is a problem difficult to solve.

The date of the introduction of the cedar of Lebanon into England is not surely known, but Aiton in the *Hortus Kewensis* of 1838 places it in 1683, the date of the planting of the trees in the Chelsea Botanic Gardens. These trees first produced cones in 1766, and since that date, the tree has been largely planted on the great estates and in the stately parks and pleasure-grounds throughout England. The English climate furnishes conditions most favorable for its growth and to-day there are thousands of noble specimens with wide-spreading branches that add a grandeur and dignity to their environment that is too often wanting in our American parks which seem young and frivolous by comparison.

At Warwick there are many beautiful examples of the cedar of Lebanon. They lend their gracious dignity to the sturdy oaks and Scotch firs about them, and even the peacocks roosting in their branches lose their vain and silly airs and become transformed birds. Within the castle, there is a great room known as the Cedar Room. It is panelled from floor to roof with the rich dark red wood of the cedars grown on the estate, and "hewn and carved by men of Warwick during the last century," according to the guide who shows one about.

The cedar was introduced into France in 1734 when Bernard de Jussieu brought from London two plants, so small, that to preserve them more securely, he is said to have carried them in his hat. Just why the simple fact that he carried them in his hat should so have taken hold of the popular imagination is hard to explain. The theme, however, has been repeated again and again and with ever widening sweeps and variations. Long since the tale escaped from the realm of fact and soared into the high thin air of fiction. Perhaps it reaches its culmination in the second volume of "The Forest Trees of Great Britain" by Johns. When we consider that the facts of the case are all presented in the few words at the beginning of this paragraph, we are prepared to enjoy the frolic that results when imagination is let loose on botanical grounds. This is the touching tale of Jussieu and his hat and the cedar of Lebanon as presented by Johns:

“Many years ago a Frenchman, who was travelling in the Holy Land, found a little seedling among the Cedars of Lebanon, which he longed to bring away as a memorial of his travels. He took it up tenderly, with all the earth about its little roots, and, for want of a better flower-pot, planted it carefully in his hat, and there he kept it and tended it.

“The voyage home was rough and tempestuous, and so much longer than usual, that the supply of fresh water in the ship fell short, and they were obliged to measure it out most carefully to each person. The captain was allowed two glasses a day, the sailors who had the work of the ship on their hands, one glass each, and the poor passengers but half a glass. In such a scarcity you may suppose the poor Cedar had no allowance at all. But our friend the traveler felt for it as his child, and each day shared with it his small half glass of precious water; and so it was, that when the vessel arrived at the port, the traveller had drunk so little water that he was almost dying, and the young Cedar so much that, behold, it was a noble and fresh little tree, six inches high!

“At the custom-house the officers, who are always suspicious of smuggling, wished to empty the hat, for they would not believe but that something more valuable in their eyes lay hid beneath the moist mould. They thought of lace or of diamonds, and began to thrust their fingers into the soil. But our poor traveler implored them so earnestly to spare his tree, and talked to them so eloquently of all that we read in the Bible of the Cedar of Lebanon, telling them of David’s house and Solomon’s temple, that the men’s hearts were softened, and they suffered the young cedar to remain undisturbed in its strange dwelling. From thence it was carried to Paris, and planted in the Jardin des Plantes.”

The two trees brought by Jussieu from London lived and flourished. One was planted in the Jardin des Plantes, and the accompanying illustration shows it as it appears to-day, stately, symmetrical, and graceful, dominating that portion of the garden where it grows. The other tree is said to be even larger and more beautiful; it was planted at the Chateau de Montigny, near Montereau.

In the beautiful pleasure-grounds of St. Cloud, there is a group of younger cedars that were planted by Marie Antoinette. They have not yet lost their lower branches and so present a habit quite different from that of the mature tree.

When the cedar of Lebanon was first introduced into the United States is not known. In 1849, a specimen fifty feet high in the grounds of Mr. Ash at Throggs Neck was considered the finest in the Union. Unfortunately the climate of New England is too severe and changeable, and that of the Middle Atlantic States is not entirely favorable for its growth. It is hardy only in the South and in California.

In Central Park, in the vicinity of Eighty-fourth street, there is a promising specimen of the cedar that in habit resembles the cedars of Marie Antoinette. It is by the walk along the reservoir on the side towards the bridle path. In Prospect Park, Brooklyn, there is another young tree. There are older specimens in Flushing, and in Princeton; in Philadelphia, in the arboretum of the Painters, there is a fine cedar that was planted at some time between 1840 and 1850.

Although the cedar of Lebanon may not be hardy with us, it is a matter for regret that since some attempts have proven successful, more efforts have not been made to cultivate this tree which would add a new element of beauty to our parks and gardens.

Two closely related cedars are proving better adapted to our climate: *Cedrus Deodara*, the Indian cedar, with its pendulous branches, and *Cedrus atlantica*, the Mount Atlas or Himalayan cedar, with rather erect branches. Of the two, the latter is the more hardy in this country. While both are desirable, neither can compete with *Cedrus libani*, the cedar of Lebanon, with its wide-spreading horizontal branches weighted with tradition and poetry.

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